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High Late-Modernists or Postmodernists? Vanguard and Linguistically Innovative British Poetries since 1960

Permissions

Recounting a two-day visit in 1956 to Worcester to visit poet Gael Turnbull, Roy Fisher lists modernist luminaries and associates of the New American Poetry he was suddenly exposed to, and explains 'I'd never seen poetry used as these people were, in their various ways, using it, nor had I seen it treated as so vital an activity. These people were behaving with all the freedom and artistic optimism of painters. Decidedly un-English'.¹ Fisher's sense of the abiding importance of *permission* as the force that underwrites creative endeavour is a salient alternative to more vexed models of influence. And yet the drive to figure innovation as a question solely of modernist heritage is too simplistic. The binary options within the question 'high late-modernists or postmodernists'? ignores so many of the English tributaries that swell contemporary vanguard practice: Maggie O'Sullivan's debt to the material-yet-visionary nature of John Clare and a much earlier Celtic heritage, the reconfigured syntax Bill Griffiths shapes from his immersion in Old-English, the sonic licence Geraldine Monk takes from Hopkins, Allen Fisher and Iain Sinclair's debt to the autodidactic mythological 'systems' of Blake, Barry MacSweeney's fascination with the faux-medievalism of Chatterton, Sean Bonney's appropriation of the apocalyptic egalitarianism of ranters like Abiezer Coppe, Keston Sutherland's re-contextualisation of vanguard language use through Pope's eighteenth century figuring of bathos. Indeed, such is the scope of British poetry since the 'mimeograph revolution' of the 1960s that attempts to contain it within labels that have academic currency is to risk acts of reductionist positioning. The anthology *Cusp* is a very useful counter to such tendencies. Its editor, Geraldine Monk, dubs it a 'collective autobiography'² that sets out to explore the nature of 'the poetic insurgence that began in the 1950s/60s' as a 'provincial one emanating from the industrial cities of the North and Midlands' rather than the

exclusive preserve of 'those two strongholds of poetic power ... London and Cambridge'.³ Monk invited upwards of twenty poets to write about their journey into poetic activity, noting 'it would take a social historian to explain why so many young, working-class people took to poetry at this time, especially the more experimental areas of expression' in an era witnessing 'the after-effects of two world wars ... and the Cold War hotting up'.⁴ What emerges in the recollections Monk gathers is how the 'very real difficulty of finding kindred spirits in small provincial towns' was mitigated by the 'small press publishing network and the alternative or specialist bookshops'.⁵ The latter might be in decline as I write this, but the former is still very much the life pulse of the area of poetry being discussed here.

The Challenge of the Long Poem

American long poems such as Williams's *Paterson*, Pound's *Cantos*, Zukofsky's *A* and Olson's *Maximus Poems* form a major legacy for British poets. Bunting's *Briggflatts* defined the British Poetry Revival of the 1960s, but since the 1970s UK poets have reached for other formal logics for the assemblage of long poems. In his 1973 collection *Act* Tom Raworth posed a significant question: 'The connections (or connectives) no longer work – so how to build the long poem everyone is straining for'?⁶ His answer in the mid to late 1970s is exemplified in poems like *Ace* and *Writing* that unfold in very short lines that resemble the outpourings of a ticker-tape machine. Where the New American Poetry privileged measure propelled by breath, Raworth explored a dislocatory syntax ambiguating the relationships between lines with a kinetic dynamism that far outpaced projective verse. Elsewhere I have written of how Raworth's short poems 'often gesture to a world beyond the grasp of the poem' whereas his long poems 'seem more concerned to enter into the pattern of a world whose wider design is acknowledged to be inaccessible'.⁷ By the time of *West Wind*, written during Margaret Thatcher's Falklands war, the poetry dramatises a scepticism towards the reader's urge to establish a pattern: 'later fragments / we assume / are one with those before / a sad dance'.⁸ And yet the sadness of this dance relates to the imposition of more politically dubious imperial narratives upon the nation as 'puffs of unrelated news / restore / our former glory / which apparently / was a global servant class / too poor / to see the crown jewels' (Raworth p. 127).

Geraldine Monk's work offers an ongoing interrogation of the 'emotional geography of place', most especially her native Lancashire. Her habitats are haunted by a sense of inequalities and injustices that the landscape has preserved as its own memory, and that charge the language with both

neologistic verve and a sense of regional historical witness. The long poem *Interregnum* manages to fuse place and character in its exploration of the so-called Pendle Witches, ten women tried and hung in East Lancashire in 1612. It closes with an incantatory occupation of the nine-year-old Jennett Device's 'possession': 'I weird sang. / High trilled and skirled ... / Rhymed thing with thing with string / ... Word buntings. / Wildways'.⁹ Monk reinvents language to re-orient her relationship to place and history in ways that calls upon her working class heritage of 'playing ... on cobbled streets, us girls doing our handstands and crab walking and our endless reciting of rhymes & chants ... Political satirical rhymes turned nonsense playground chant'.¹⁰ Her sequence 'Hidden Cities' was a performance work commissioned by the Ruskin School of Fine Art as part of a series of 'alternative' bus tours around five English cities. She was allotted Manchester, and takes a less-than-scenic route through the fluidity and menace of 'Funchester ... Gunchester ... Madchester'.¹¹ On this trip we are 'X-ing territorial membranes. // Unseenable'. Through a punning discourse we witness the ghostliness of the hidden city, its 'Unguest terrors. / Hexing. Unguessed traces'.

Robert Sheppard's *Twentieth Century Blues* is a long poem that has learnt from the politicised discontinuities of Raworth and the polyvocality of Monk. Sheppard was part of the London poetry scene in the 1980s and co-edited, with Adrian Clarke, an important anthology *Floating Capital*. It gathered work from a generation of 'linguistically innovative' poets embarking upon work subtly different from the 'Open Field' poetry of the seventies, and the afterword noted 'if there was less evidence of varieties of overtly utopian poetics through the 80s, there was an expanded range of critical strategies in texts whose writers have relinquished claims to proprietorial control of meaning'.¹² Written between 1989 and 2000, *Twentieth Century Blues* is a vast 'network' of poems built around a sense that 'Bunting was right, that the world changes too quickly in the twentieth century for a long poem. All that can be sketched out in advance are generative schema'.¹³ Despite its page-based publication, the formal logic is closer to the multi-linearity of digital hypertext work. Sheppard not only conceived the work as time-based, designed to end with the century, but in the final 'complete' edition of the poem he also gives individual pieces a complex numbering which allows such pieces to belong to several 'strands' at once; a simultaneity that enables and urges the reader to chart different paths through the collection rather than necessarily opt for a linear 'chronological' path. As he explains it 'The long poem's ambition towards inclusiveness, its grasping for totality, with all its attendant drifts into dogmatism as well as stale repetition, has been, at least in this [20th] century, its most negative condition' (Shepard p. 84).

Agoraphobia and the Tyranny of Labels

It would be easy to reproduce here what Roy Fisher has called an ‘idiot bipartite map’ of mainstream versus modernist/postmodernist/experimental poetry (Fisher, p. 121). A more nuanced account can be found in Drew Milne’s ‘Neo-Modernism and Avant-Grade Orientations’, and David and Christine Kennedy’s ‘Terms of Engagement: Experimental Poetry and Its Others’. Milne stresses that what is meant by modernism is less a movement, or canon, more ‘an experimental orientation developed through cosmopolitan networks’.¹⁴ The Kennedys quote Chris Hamilton-Emery’s sense that bipartite distinctions between vanguard and mainstream no longer function as ‘what we have now is a multiplicity of practices and readerships and no real framework for understanding their trajectories, outside of consumption’.¹⁵ The applicability of postmodernism is no less contested; the phrase ‘postmoderns’ is already tainted with caricature in the wake of Don Paterson’s ill-tempered preface to the *New British Poetry*.¹⁶ And this is far from the only objection to the term. When, in 2004, Rod Mengham and John Kinsella edited an impressively geographically diverse anthology, *Vanishing Points*, it was explicitly subtitled *New Modernist Poems*; and claimed the writers gathered have ‘stayed in touch with the agendas of modernism; they are not postmodernist, but late modernist writers’.¹⁷ Fundamental to Mengham’s assertion of a ‘late’ modernism is a need to separate the poets in question from the ‘postmodernist ideology’ of ‘language’ writing. The reasons for such a distinction will be addressed later.¹⁸

An earlier Milne essay from the nineties admitted ‘Someone trying to approach the fragments of the British avant-garde over the last 25 years will look in vain for helpful and easily available manifestos for contemporary poetry.’¹⁹ This article was originally delivered as a paper at the Cambridge Conference of Contemporary Poetry on the theme of ‘21st century poetry’ and addresses a ‘conspiracy of expertise’, Milne’s summary phrase for how the perceived cultural marginality of poetry has left the small-press poetry scene with a sense of heritage that ‘becomes almost theological in the depth of assumed knowledges, and hermetic in its collectivity’ (Milne 1993, p. 26). His final topic, agoraphobia, points to these writers’ reluctance to make public declarations in the form of manifestos. Milne prods at this reluctance in a bid to ‘develop a different social basis for a poetry which is both public and private, while transforming the terms of such an opposition’ (Ibid., p. 29). His talk is salient for its hunger for a conception of poetry as a ‘collective mediation’, and I shall attend to two historical moments that feed such hunger.

Two Utopian Episodes

Milne directly refers to the first moment by closing his discussion with a lengthy quotation from *The English Intelligencer*²⁰ about the push towards poetry ‘as to whatever extent a communal activity’ (38). *TEI* was a ‘work-sheet’ begun in 1965 and passed on, in the form of photocopies, to a pre-selected list of people presumed to have an interest. It was not available in any commercial sense, and not susceptible to any external economic or distributive pressures. The pressures it did seek were social, communal. The contributors were united through their interest in the New American Poetry and poetics of the 1950s and 1960s, and *TEI* first appeared with a bold declaration: ‘The Intelligencer is for the Island and its language, to circulate as quickly as needs be’. Initially, Andrew Crozier’s editorship was virtually invisible, printing all material sent. But this led to problems with some contributors mistaking the space on offer as being that of a conventional publication with no attendant obligation towards dialogical engagement and participation. Crozier intervened in 1967 to explain ‘The Intelligencer is hardly a magazine, and I’ve never regarded what has circulated in it as published’.²¹ This solicited responses from Peter Riley about the ‘need to share something more than private correspondence can cope with’ and how ‘... the language we can use has to be worked out in common, among however many will allow themselves to trust, respond, risk, REACT, move outside their private worlds’ (Ibid., p. 207). A second series of *TEI* began in April 1967, under Riley’s new editorship, with an ‘announcement’ prompted by a summary of the achievements of recent American poetry (particularly Charles Olson) and its relevance for British poetry. The poem was defined as ‘physiological presence + cosmological range’, the latter concept initiating a complex debate about what conclusions could be drawn from pre-history in order to understand the present landscape condition of humankind. Such a vast project was a conscious determination to push poetry into a scope so extensive that it could be maintained only by a communal venture. The ramifications of the project – both its hopes and failures – certainly reverberate through Riley and Prynne’s lengthy oeuvre. Over a decade after the waning of the *Intelligencer* project, Riley was still occupying an interrogatory mode intent upon undermining the primacy of the ‘poet occupying his own private world of language and experience’ (Ibid., p. 35). *Lines on the Liver*, from 1981, states, ‘I don’t anyway see how any person / Could hope to attain to a greater degree / Of sufficiency compaction and cleverness / Than a brown berry fallen in the grass’. We are invited to ‘Look at it sitting there with its maps / And its charts and its migratory tables: / It settles its fate before it starts / To a plain contingency – / It waits to be eaten’.²²

The second moment is the reverse to that of *TEI*, and concerns a period in the mid-1970s when poets associated with the British Poetry Revival of the 1960s and its network of magazines and small presses found themselves with access to the most public institution in British Poetry, the Poetry Society, and its journal *Poetry Review*. Eric Mottram, a poet, critic and lecturer at King's College in London, played a crucial role in this moment when 'a small group of 'radical' or 'experimental' poets took over the Poetry Society ... for a period of six years, from 1971 to 1977'.²³ Peter Barry's account of this episode of *Poetry Wars* is an exhaustive documentary of this period, and also constitutes what he regards as 'a case study of the inevitable frictions and tactical struggles between an avant-garde and a 'mainstream''²⁴ (*Ibid.*, p. 2). Mottram's 'revival' (he coined the term) centred upon a sense that 'The parameters of poetry and poetics were recognised afresh as geology, geography, etymology, history and the erotic' with an accompanying belief in 'the discovery of coherences and locations for a renewal of civic poetry in the culture'.²⁵ It is a tale of poets infiltrating the General Council of the Society, conflict with the Arts Council, boycotts and eventual resignations. But, as with *TEI*, this episode reverberates beyond its historical moment, and informs the poetic work later generations and the questions they interrogate. Not least of these questions concerns the capabilities and culpabilities of language itself, and the degree to which it can bear communal endeavour.

Prynne's experiences of the *Intelligencer* years of the sixties provoked poems (featured in *TEI*) suspicious of the designs they might have upon a collective: 'we/you/they, all the / pronouns by now know how to make a sentence work with *ought to*'.²⁶ Ken Edwards, a London poet in the 1980s (and editor of the important *Reality Studios* magazine, and subsequent Reality Street Editions press) was working within vanguard networks in the capital after the *Poetry Review* debacle, when the then prime minister Margaret Thatcher infamously claimed 'there is no such thing as society'. In *Intensive Care* he writes 'No public language that is / fit for such a time'.²⁷ The sequence in question is titled 'Their Daily Island Life', and its gentle restatement of the phrase 'behind the wire' builds in its intense sense of socioeconomic division, just as the title's third person plural pronoun posits the poem's distance from any attainable collective sense of belonging. Lines like 'I have tried (he wrote) / to knit fragments to make / coherence' log Eliot's Modernist shoring of fragments against personal ruin, but neither ironises nor endorses it. The poem works in a recombinatory fashion, revisiting key phrases like 'There was a country' and 'I have known people' in ways that make their simple decontextualised statements an index to values lost to a ruthlessly monetarist agenda. Suspicion is cast upon those to whom access to a public language is part of their class privilege: 'I have known

people / whose language is public & pursues / or attains coherence. / Their house is too hot & is full / of beautiful things' (Ibid., p. 69), and the close of the poem moves towards a specific people; the marginalised poor, the sick, and the immigrant. And yet it admits 'there is a thing about them / I can't tell' (Ibid., p. 70). The poem manages to gesture towards what it cannot 'tell' in the absence of a public language that shares, and enshrines, communitarian values. During the period immediately after *Intensive Care*, Edwards would take these poetic concerns and focus them upon his own communal milieu. In the auspicious year 1984, he gave a talk called 'The We Expression'. Robert Sheppard explains that 'This was a singular London excursion into the American language poetry mode of the "talk" and emphasises how 'Discussion of poetics was rare in this London avant-garde and Edwards's gesture to sacrifice a poetry reading to public thinking was a revolutionary one'.²⁸ The substance of his talk was later published as 'Grasping the plural'²⁹; an interrogation of the nuances of the collective pronoun 'we' that Margaret Thatcher infamously co-opted as a 'first person plural,' after ten years in power, in the phrase 'We have become a grandmother' (Ibid., p. 21).

In/Adequate Language

For all the connotations poetry has as an art of accomplished language use, vanguard British poetry is often ambivalent towards its very materials, and suspicious of such a sense of mastery (with all the gendered politics that implies). Raworth's careful line break in 'Stag Skull Mounted' slices into this ambivalence with both humour and scepticism: 'in/adequate language/ i love you'.³⁰ An early Denise Riley poem, 'A note on sex and 'the reclaiming of language' plays with Renaissance tropes that align the discovery of new lands with the virgin land of the female body in need of conquering. 'She' is figured as a 'Savage' who returns from the 'New Country' only to weep at the airport being 'asked to by wood carvings, which represent herself' as exotic other.³¹ Riley, a feminist critic with several monographs to her name – including *Am I That Name* which disputes the validity of the category 'woman' – offers a subtle interrogation of how female identity is colonised through interpellation. She carefully places 'the reclaiming of language' in scare quotes in anxious meditation that resistance to the generic pronoun 'He' will force her to occupy a female pronoun no less distant from a sense of individual agency. Instead, the poem offers 'The work is / e.g. to write 'she' and for that to be a statement / of fact only and not a strong image / of everything that is not-you, which sees you'. A later poem, 'Milk Ink', casts a sceptical eye upon the essentialist French feminist vision of an *écriture féminine* that writes the body. It opens with the injunction 'Don't

read this as white ink flow, pressed out /Of retractable nipples. No, / Black as his is mine' (Ibid., p. 104). In much of her work there is a continuation of W. S. Graham's sense of the autonomy of a language that won't be tamed by the author's intentions. Graham's *Malcolm Mooney's Land* both posits and creates an arctic landscape whereby the male poet-adventurer crosses a frozen landscape that is also a representation of the white expanse of the page, with print figured as footprints: writing-as-journey-into-uncharted territory. In Riley's 'A Shortened Set' the Scottish poet's 'Grammarsow' and 'word-louse' have become her 'animals of unease' critically eating into her manuscripts (Ibid., p. 40).

Robert Duncan, an American poet with affiliations to both Black Mountain and the San Francisco Renaissance, proclaimed himself a 'derivative' poet, explaining 'I'm a development in a language, but I certainly didn't develop the language ... and at the same time I am the only place where that derivation can happen'.³² Duncan's discussion was informed by an understanding of DNA, and this biological account of language has certainly been influential, for example, upon Allen Fisher – a poet to whom he bears little stylistic affinity. In a public talk from the late 1970s, Fisher quotes from Robert Kelly's *Against the Code* to usher in an important sense that 'through the manipulation and derangement of ordinary language the conditioned world is changed, weakened, in its associated links, its power to hold an unconscious world-view together'.³³ Fisher uses this quotation in a talk about his long poem *Place*, in some sense a misunderstood work because its title is too easily assimilated into a post-Olsonian vision of the 'open form' epic.³⁴ As Olson dug into the history of Gloucester, so Fisher delves into London, and the many tributaries of the Thames buried beneath the streets of the city. Peter Barry developed the term 'content-specific' for poetry 'which explores highly specific materials and data with heuristic intent and as implicit metaphor'³⁵ and yet, as shown in his chosen Kelly quotation, Fisher has other preoccupations too. The Kelly quote nods towards Russian Formalist interests in the necessity of cultivating linguistic strangeness, defamiliarisation, in order to alter our perceptions (and the structures they uphold) in order to 'make the stone *stony*'³⁶ and reconnect ourselves with the material conditions of daily life. But the quote also stresses the importance of extending that disruption and strangeness to the idea of associated links. Fisher's work, in *Place* and beyond, is a complex dance between pattern and pattern disruption. Olson's 'Projective Verse' expounds an organic sense that 'ONE PERCEPTION MUST IMMEDIATELY AND DIRECTLY LEAD TO A FURTHER PERCEPTION'. Fisher mistrusts the resulting sense of an overarching master narrative, and yet Olson is also the source of his suspicion. Olson's Gloucester epic has Maximus as its central

pivot, but his *Special View of History* cites Keats's idea of negative capability as the desirable capacity 'of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason'.³⁷ Olson recognised this as a precursor to Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle whereby 'a methodology becomes the object of its attention' and the observer always effects what is observed.³⁸ Fisher's work takes from this a prompt to rethink the validity of stable models: 'What we're looking for in a model is coherence. What I'm saying is, that's no longer enough. That's far too much of a summarising exclusory activity' (Fisher 2003, p. 116). He has also interrogated Olson's notion of 'Proprioception', taking its conception into directions that might stand for a useful distinction between the American-informed British Poetry Revival of the 1960s and vanguard British poetic practice since the 1970s. Olson's proprioception is a brief piece, partly in his urgent 'notes' format, that acknowledges "the data of depth sensibility / the 'body' of us as object which spontaneously or of its own order produces experience of ... SENSIBILITY WITHIN THE ORGANISM BY MOVEMENT OF ITS OWN TISSUES".³⁹ Fisher appropriates the idea to produce a summary of a poetics that foregrounds the notion of a 'multiple text' open to giving the reader many 'performance-options'.⁴⁰ As he has it 'Proprioception encourages the compositional paradigm that allows you to situate yourself, through discriminating performance or narration, as part of the process of aesthetic participation'.⁴¹

Like Fisher, J. H. Prynne's work since the sixties has developed a distinctive response to language that incorporates an astonishing range of specialist discourses into its poetry. Early Prynne, in the *TEI* years, is replete with remorse at the casual violence of expression: 'I draw blood whenever I open my stupid mouth',⁴² and this ethical concern with damage and wounded utterance has never left his work. And yet by the end of the seventies, *Down Where Changed* took distinctly pessimistic steps away from the moral urgency of his earlier work, into a profound sense of the incapacities and culpabilities of language. The book ends with quandary ('What do you say then / Well yes and no / About four times a day') edging into resignation: 'Sick and nonplussed / By the thought of less / You say stuff it'.⁴³

The aesthetic Allen Fisher describes in his extension of Olson's proprioception into the realm of readerly reception is the locus of nuanced debate within contemporary poetics, especially in the light of the American Language poets. The influential journal *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* began the year before *Down Where Changed*, showcasing a generation of 'language-centred' writers informed by Marxist and poststructuralist philosophy. Accompanied by Robert Grenier's famous pronouncement 'I HATE SPEECH', such writers offered a materialist critique of the expressivist tendencies of the New

American poetry. Charles Bernstein was concerned with 'seeing language not as a transparency, not as something which simply dissolves as you get a picture of the world in focus, so that, in reading a text you are hardly aware of the language at all'.⁴⁴ Resisting the 'referential fallacy', and keeping the reader's focus upon the texture and materiality of the language, were seen as redefining hierarchical reader-writer relations. A Marxist sense of being made passive consumers of language as a commodity fetishized for its illusion of transparency led to a call for the readerly act of 'repossessing the sign through close attention to, and active participation in, its production'.⁴⁵ American 'language centred' emphasis upon the liberatory 'freedom' the reader is offered by the text that 'resists' reference differs from its UK counterpart. In a document first published in a spoof magazine, Prynne balked at the claims being made; not because he disagreed with the politicised account of commodified language, but because he refused to see the poem as immune from such forces. Since early poems such as 'Sketch for a Financial Theory of the Self' Prynne has utilised the model of market economics precisely because its scope encompasses the commodification of both freedom and dissent. His 'Letter to Steve McCaffery' is suspicious of the 'open text' and any proposed readerly freedom to produce meaning. It asks 'Isn't it the classic freedom to eat cake, to diversify an assumed leisure and to choose out of a diversity which is precisely the commodity-spectacle of a pre-disposed array, clearwrapped in unitised portion control?'⁴⁶ A later letter to Allen Fisher confirms how Prynne's emphasis varies from the Language poets, and confirms the direction his increasingly impacted and fractured practice has taken since the aforementioned *Down Where Changed*: 'The reader's freedom was to be constantly interfered with, as an invidious commodity; pretending that there had been no immunity to the violence and yet also noticing that pretense as just that'.⁴⁷

Immunity and Inoculation: A Contemporary War Poetry

Milne's 'Agoraphobia' piece from the 1990s contains a statement that certainly pre-empts the emergence of a younger generation of vanguard poets in the next decade: 'The most important modernist manifesto is Marx's Communist Manifesto'.⁴⁸ Articulations such as Prynne's above on the complexity of poetry's complicity in capitalist structures have had a profound effect on a younger generation of poets forging a sense of collective endeavour since the mid-nineties in magazines such as *Object Permanence*, *Quid*, *Onedit*, *High Zero*, *Hix Eros*; small presses such as Barque, Bad Press, Yt Communications, Crater Press, and in online journals such as *Glossator* and seminal blogs like Sean Bonney's *Abandonedbuildings*. Indeed, *Complicities*

is the title of a collection of essays devoted to poetry and criticism that 'knows language to be profoundly complicit across the board in the extension of acts of domination, from the preparation for and execution of war, to the composition of the suicide note, from the overt corrupting of the democratic franchise, to cold calling's interpellation of the human subject as consumer-in-waiting'.⁴⁹

It has been a little observed fact that British vanguard poetry since the eighties has offered some of the most insightful and adventurous war poetry of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. A roll call would have to include Tom Raworth's Falklands-conflict era 'West Wind', Denise Riley's negotiation of the ethnic conflicts in the former Yugoslavia in 'Laibach Lyrik', John Wilkinson's *The Nile* on the first Gulf War, and *Iphigenia* on the second, Robert Sheppard's examination of the war on terror, *Warrant Error*, and Carol Watts's punning adoption of George Bush's dominant verbalizing of 'I-raq' in the news in *Wrack*. Poets such as Bonney, Keston Sutherland, Andrea Brady, Peter Manson and Marianne Morris have been profoundly shaped by emerging as writers into a 'global war on terror' ushered in by the 9/11 attacks that prompted George W. Bush to controversially state 'This crusade – this War on Terrorism – is going to take a while'. Sam Ladkin and Robin Purves, young critics both heavily active in the editing and publishing of poetry within the small press scenes, edited *Complicities* and a special British Poetry issue for *Chicago Review*. The introduction to this issue unites the poets in question through 'concern with consumption in all its forms, and especially the co-implication of digestive, commercial, military, and information economies'.⁵⁰ There is an intensity and rigor to the engagement with such concerns that seems markedly different in emphasis from the politicisation of poetic form as argued for by the language poets. Whereas language writing rejected lyric modes, these poets have interrogated them precisely because they are a site of conflict, and precisely because the 'purity' of lyric address cannot be granted immunity. Prynne theorised this conflict early, in the 1980s, in a letter to the poet Andrew Duncan⁵¹ that diagnoses Prynne's sense of a 'privilege of exemption' within the lyric stance in its 'readiness to claim the privilege of an autonomous occasion which covertly it exploits'.⁵² He questions the capacity of such lyric identification to offer critique and transcendence: 'How can you give, unless you are to present merely symptomatic malnutrition, what you claim to have taken away'.⁵³

Andrea Brady's poetry has absorbed these questions into its very skin. *Cold Calling's* title simultaneously blends a sense of the detached rigour of poetic vocation and the invasive unsolicited telesales pitch in complicit combination. Recent work has found her more attuned to the risks of occupying a rhetoric of politicised outrage. It is perhaps a risk that the female

poet is more attuned to, having less 'natural' right to occupy a public voice. Denise Riley's poem 'Problems of Horror' offers a gendered critique of the allure of outrage in which a male pronoun, 'He,' has 'tailored a cadence out of disgust, and spins to see its hang on him'.⁵⁴ The sense of dubious display extends to the poet being 'privately faint at heart' as he pirouettes 'sporting a lapel nausea carnation', knowing 'this smooth emulsion is truly-felt revulsion'.⁵⁵ The poem's opening question, 'Through perfectly heat-sealed lyric, how to breathe?' might summarise Brady's suspicions over her own facility with a poetry of occasion. Such concerns drove her to the verse essay as a 'forensic' form whose 'structure could accommodate an excess of social information'.⁵⁶ This marks a conscious attempt to decentralise her lyric practice, and the choice of subject matter assists with this. *Wildfire* is further proof of the versatility of British vanguard war poetry. It is a book-length poem concerned with 'the history of incendiary devices, of the evolution of Greek fire from a divine secret which could sustain or destroy empires, into white phosphorous and napalm'.⁵⁷ The book's subtitle, 'a verse essay on Obscurity and Illumination', is there to keep in check the allure of the pyrotechnics of poetic outrage. It makes the poem additionally 'an interrogation of writing practices which fume as much as they enlighten'.⁵⁸ When such matters are addressed, it is Prynne's critique of the politics of lyric address that shines through in her observation 'I was tired of trying to position "us" on the ground, like actors in real carnage, where being "implicated" is also a way of sharing the spoils'.⁵⁹ This makes for a nuanced poetry that urges 'Remember I am / on fire / cannot be trusted'.⁶⁰

In the last fifteen years, Keston Sutherland has engaged in the most sustained tracking of the implications of Prynne's position. At the turn of the twenty-first century, Sutherland returned to the eighteenth century for a model of the attitudes towards language applicable to 'innovative poetry', suggesting that the new century constitutes 'the crest' of a 'mythic triumph of liberalization' begun in an earlier historical moment of parallel 'massive financial upheaval'. It is the point at which Pope introduced the word and concept of 'Bathos,' 'the Bottom, the End, the Central Point, the *non plus ultra* of true Modern Poesie'.⁶¹ Pope intended such a category as a means of ridiculing corrupt language, Sutherland notes how these debased and corrupt features of language use are precisely those celebrated in contemporary vanguard practice. He grasps for a poetry of affirmatory bathos that 'tends not to regret, but to celebrate the idea of its inadequacy, and to reject the desire for moral rectitude which seems implicit in the very idea that language might be adequate'.⁶² Prynne is the model, and a later essay focuses upon the turn in his later poetry, noting it 'was not from its beginning condemned to be the moral anthropology of the consumerism of suffering'.⁶³ Sutherland's

first book of critical writing furthers his examination of bathos by revisiting Marx as a satirist of consumption whose very style is ‘the concentrated literary exposure of social contradiction’.⁶⁴ He discloses that previous accounts of Marx have ignored his ‘risks in style, his seizure, infiltration and parodic recycling of what he called the ‘the jargon of Political Economy’,⁶⁵ qualities that make *Das Capital* a work of ‘internal generic disintegration ... a difficult collage of the poetic, the scientific and the jargonist within individual sentences and ideas’.⁶⁶ This prompts a revisitation of one of the most influential tenets of Marxist thought, the concept of the abstraction of human labour. Sutherland takes Marx back to the original German, and finds that human beings are reduced to the word *Gallerte*. It is not the supposed abstract noun indicating a process of congelation, but a specific commodity: concentrated glue that all animals yield when industrially boiled down. As such, Sutherland uncovers Marx’s vivid sense that ‘social existence under capitalism is thus gruesomely savage and primitivistic ... in the still more disgusting sense that our most routine, unavoidable and everyday act, the act of consumption of use value – that is, first of all, purchase – is in every case an act of cannibalism’.⁶⁷ Sutherland’s poetry spares us none of this barbarism. Instead it gleefully serves it with ballistic force in the opening to ‘Torture Lite’: ‘Candied *faits divers* in frosted crackling, hurl myself / myself-mud immaterially scoffing up my fig / leaf face in a panto breakfast of hallucinations’.⁶⁸

Sean Bonney’s resolutely urban work has frequently touched base with nineteenth-century French poetry closest to the tremors of social revolution: the Baudelaire Benjamin celebrated as ‘a Lyric poet in an era of high capitalism’, whom he has ‘translated’ into spikey missives of post-concrete poetry; and Rimbaud who he has partly ventriloquized, partly reconstituted, as a poet of the Paris Commune, in *Happiness*. Bonney first found his poetic direction in the collection *Poisons, their antidotes*. The title gives a flavour of its concerns with the tensions in poetic language between the need to utter critique, and the degree to which such language can inoculate itself from the poisons it would swallow in order to spit out. Tony Blair is a particularly vivid target: ‘blair is / personal / cannot reconsider the / salt in my face is / real is / bitter’.⁶⁹ Since such work, Bonney has shown himself on a quest ‘to wake up this morning / and wake up this morning’⁷⁰ unembarrassed at occupying a sense of the visionary. Writing about Geraldine Monk, he praises her poetry for its consideration ‘of what language, song and spell might mean’⁷¹ and for being ‘a part of the historical heretical current, opposed to the official version of reality’.⁷² *Document* asserts a singular vision that also taps into the forces at work in other younger British vanguard poets: ‘There is no refuge to be had in the separation of artistic,

social and sexual desires, or a stone to soak up the groaning protein interference. We are condemned to speak by the same causes that drive the world into war, to determine which ideas are taken to market: radio waves, muscle, crotch split'.⁷³ Bonney's poetry is emblematic of so much of the excitements of contemporary British poetry in its call for 'the taste of waking strange with new speech circuits'.⁷⁴

NOTES

- 1 Roy Fisher, *Interviews through Time and Selected Prose* (Kentisbeare: Shearsman, 2000), p. 31.
- 2 Geraldine Monk, ed. *Cusp: Recollections of Poetry in Transition* (Bristol: Shearsman: 2012), p. 7.
- 3 Ibid., p. 8.
- 4 Ibid., p. 12.
- 5 Ibid., p. 8.
- 6 Tom Raworth, *Tottering State: Selected Poems 1963–1987* (London: Paladin, 1988), p. 91.
- 7 Simon Perril, 'What Rhymes with Cow / and Starts with N': Tom Raworth's Time and Motion Studies', in Nate Dorward ed. *Removed for Further Study: The Poetry of Tom Raworth* (Toronto: The Gig, 2003), p. 126.
- 8 Tom Raworth, *Collected Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2003), p. 358.
- 9 Geraldine Monk, *Selected Poems* (Cambridge: Salt, 2003), p. 163.
- 10 Monk 2012, p. 183.
- 11 Geraldine Monk, *Noctivagations* (Sheffield: West House, 2001), p. 63.
- 12 Adrian Clarke, Robert Sheppard, eds., *Floating Capital: New Poets from London* (Elmwood: Potes and Poets Press 21, 1991), p. 123.
- 13 Robert Sheppard, *Complete Twentieth Century Blues* (Great Wilbraham: Salt, 2008), p. 332.
- 14 Drew Milne, 'Neo-Modernism and Avant-Garde Orientations' in Nigel Alderman, C. D. Blanton, eds., *A Concise Companion to Postwar British and Irish Poetry* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), p. 160.
- 15 David Kennedy, Christine Kennedy, *Women's Experimental Poetry in Britain 1970–2010: Body, Time & Locale* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013), p. 20.
- 16 Paterson's preface is to the American anthology *New British Poetry*, an outburst occasioned by Keith Tuma's Oxford *Anthology of Twentieth-Century British and Irish Poetry* which has overt modernist leanings, and reinstates the significance of an Irish Modernist heritage through the inclusion of Brian Coffey and Denis Devlin alongside contemporary poets such as Trevor Joyce, Maurice Scully and Randolph Healy. For a riposte to Paterson, see Andrea Brady, 'Meagrely Provided': A Response to Don Paterson', *Chicago Review*, 49.3/4 and 50.1 (Summer 2004), 396–402. For a more positive use of the term postmodernism see Peter Brooker, 'Postmodern Postpoetry: Tom Raworth's *Tottering State*' in Anthony Easthope, John O. Thompson, eds. *Contemporary Poetry Meets Modern Theory* (Toronto, Buffalo and London: University of Toronto Press, 1991) pp. 153–65.

- 17 Rod Mengham, John Kinsella, eds. *Vanishing Points: New Modernist Poems* (Cambridge: Salt, 2004), p. xviii.
- 18 For a more detailed sense of the complexity of UK poetry's relationship to 'language writing', see Robert Sheppard's chapter, 'Beyond Anxiety: Legacy or Miscegenation' in *When Bad Times Made for Good Poetry*. The book also engages with the emergence of the label 'Linguistically Innovative' as a further designation, again sometimes contested, for the poetry discussed here.
- 19 Drew Milne, 'Agoraphobia, and the Embarrassment of Manifestos: Notes towards a Community of Risk'. *Parataxis: Modernism and Modern Writing*, no.3, Spring 1993, p. 33.
- 20 Given that Milne's piece points to the parlous and confusing state of TEI manuscripts in academic libraries, we are grateful for a recent, intelligently edited anthology: Neil Pattison, Reitha Pattison, Luke Roberts, eds. *Certain Prose of the English Intelligencer*. (Cambridge: Mountain, 2012, second revised edition 2014).
- 21 Neil Pattison, Reitha Pattison, Luke Roberts, eds. *Certain Prose of the English Intelligencer* (Cambridge: Mountain, 2012, second revised edition 2014), p. 204.
- 22 Peter Riley, *Lines on the Liver* (London: Ferry Press, 1981) unpaginated.
- 23 Peter Barry, *Poetry Wars: British Poetry of the 1970s and the Battle of Earls Court* (Cambridge: Salt, 2006), p. 1.
- 24 *Ibid.*, p. 2.
- 25 Eric Mottram, 'The British Poetry Revival, 1960-75', in Peter Barry, Robert Hampson, eds., *New British Poetries: the Scope of the Possible* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993) pp. 15-50, pp. 28-29.
- 26 J. H. Prynne, *Poems* (Newcastle Upon Tyne, South Freemantle: Bloodaxe / Folio / Freemantle Arts Centre Press, 1997), p. 112.
- 27 Ken Edwards, *No Public Language: Selected Poems 1975-1995* (Exeter: Shearsman, 2006), p. 68.
- 28 Robert Sheppard, *When Bad Times Made for Good Poetry: Episodes in the History of the Poetics of Innovation* (Exeter: Shearsman, 2011), p. 101.
- 29 Ken Edwards, 'Grasping the Plural', in Denise Riley, ed. *Poets on Writing: Britain, 1970-1991* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1992), pp. 21-29.
- 30 Raworth 2003, p. 79.
- 31 Denise Riley, *Selected Poems* (London: Reality Street Editions, 2000), p. 11.
- 32 Quoted in Stephen Collis, Graham Lyons, eds., *Reading Duncan Reading: Robert Duncan and the Poetics of Derivation* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2012), p. 29.
- 33 Allen Fisher, *The Marvels of Lambeth: Interviews & Statements by Allen Fisher*, ed. Andrew Duncan (Bristol: Shearsman Books, 2013), p. 51.
- 34 For a detailed account of the trajectory of Fisher's work across his two long poem projects *Place* and *Gravity as a Consequence of Shape*, see Robert Sheppard's 'Allen Fisher's Apocalypse Then: Between *Place* and Gravity – Technique and Technology', and 'Fracture and Fracture: Resisting the Total in Allen Fisher's *Gravity as a Consequence of Shape*' both in his *When Bad Times Made for Good Poetry*.
- 35 Peter Barry, 'Allen Fisher and "Content-Specific" Poetry', in Peter Barry, Robert Hampson, eds., *New British Poetries: the Scope of the Possible* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993), p. 201.

- 36 The phrase 'make the stony *stony*' comes from Victor Shklovsky's seminal essay called 'Art as Technique' (1917). See Rick Rylance, ed., *Debating Texts* (Open University Press, 1987), pp. 48–49.
- 37 Charles Olson, *The Special View of History*, ed. Ann Charters (Berkeley: Oyez, 1970), p. 14.
- 38 Ibid., pp. 41–42.
- 39 Charles Olson, *Collected Prose*, eds. Donald Allen, Benjamin Friedlander (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), p. 181.
- 40 Allen Fisher, 'Notes for the Conference Contemporary Poetry and Performance', *Fragmente* 7, 1997, p. 111.
- 41 Ibid., p. 111.
- 42 J. H. Prynne, *Poems* (Newcastle Upon Tyne, South Freemantle: Bloodaxe / Folio / Freemantle Arts Centre Press, 1997), p. 82.
- 43 Ibid., p. 310.
- 44 Quoted from Bruce Andrews, Charles Bernstein, 'The Pacifica Interview', *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* 3, Oct. 1981. Unpaginated.
- 45 Bruce Andrews, Charles Bernstein, eds. *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984), p. x.
- 46 J. H. Prynne, 'Letter to Steve McCaffery', *The Gig* 7, 2000 pp. 40–46 (p. 41).
- 47 J. H. Prynne, 'A Letter to Allen Fisher', *Parataxis* 8/9, pp. 157–58.
- 48 Milne 1993, p. 30.
- 49 Back cover blurb to Sam Ladkin, Robin Purves, eds. *Complicities: British Poetry 1945–2007* (Prague: Literaria Pragensia, 2007).
- 50 Sam Ladkin, Robin Purves, eds. *Chicago Review* 53:1 Spring 2007. British Poetry Issue, pp. 1–8.
- 51 Andrew Duncan edits the important journal *Angel Exhaust* and has published many poetry collections, as well as two monographs: *The Failure of Conservatism in Modern British Poetry* (Salt 2003) and *The Council of Heresy: a Primer of Poetry in a Balkanised Terrain* (Shearsman 2009).
- 52 J. H. Prynne, 'A Letter to Andrew Duncan', *Grosseteste Review* 15, 1983–84, 105.
- 53 Ibid., p. 105.
- 54 Denise Riley 2000, p. 103.
- 55 Ibid., p. 103.
- 56 Andrea Brady, *Wildfire: A Verse Essay on Obscurity and Illumination* (San Francisco: Krupskaya, 2010), p. 71.
- 57 Ibid., p. 71.
- 58 Ibid., p. 71.
- 59 Ibid., p. 71.
- 60 Ibid., p. 13.
- 61 Keston Sutherland, 'The Trade in Bathos' *Jacket*. 15 (2001). <http://jacketmagazine.com/15/sutherland-bathos.html> accessed 25 Feb. 2015.
- 62 Ibid.
- 63 Keston Sutherland, 'X L Prynne', in Ian Brinton, ed. *A Manner of Utterance: the Poetry of J. H. Prynne* (Exeter: Shearsman, 2009), p. 109.
- 64 Keston Sutherland, *Stupefaction: A Radical Anatomy of Phantoms* (London, Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2011), p. 47.
- 65 Ibid., pp. 38–39.
- 66 Ibid., p. 39.

- 67 Ibid., p. 49.
68 Keston Sutherland, *Neocosis* (London: Barque, 2005), p. 17.
69 Sean Bonney, *Poisons, Their Antidotes* (Sheffield: West House Books, 2003). Unpaginated.
70 Sean Bonney, *Document: Poems, Diagrams, Manifestos July 7th 2005-June 27th 2007* (London: Barque Press, 2009), p. 10.
71 Sean Bonney, 'What the Tourists Never See: the Social Poetics of Geraldine Monk', in Scott Thurston, ed. *The Salt Companion to Geraldine Monk* (Cambridge: Salt, 2007), pp. 62–78 (p. 68).
72 Ibid., p. 73.
73 Bonney 2009, p. 17.
74 Ibid., p. 19.